# ASSESSMENT OF THE UNDER THE WILLOWS PROGRAM

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Catholic
Children's Aid Society
of Hamilton

*Interval House*
*of Hamilton*
FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE

THE ONTARIO TRILLIUM FOUNDATION
LA FONDATION TRILLIUM DE L'ONTARIO

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In January 2008, the Advisory Committee for the Under the Willows program partnered with the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC) to conduct an evaluation of their program. Operating since 2003, the Willows program is a collaborative effort between Lynwood Hall Child and Family Centre, a children's mental health centre, the Catholic Children's Aid of Hamilton and Interval House, a local not for profit agency that supports women who have experienced abusive relationships. The program is run on Lynwood Hall's West mountain location, where a grove of mature willow trees provided obvious inspiration for the program's name.

Under the Willows is an integrated arts, gardening and play program for children who have experienced violence and/or trauma in their lives. Under the Willows maintains the vision "where children grow". The mission, as defined by the program's advisory committee, is "to create a sustainable unique arts and garden program in a beautiful natural space where children grow in relationship to themselves and the world around them".

Dr. Ruth Pickering, Advisory Committee member and founder of the Willows program observed that "Whatever we do in these child service systems --- reducing risk, improving behavior, keeping the children safe, modifying their behavior, medicating their symptoms ----- none of it is intentionally about bringing joy, stimulating creativity and imagination or having fun with them". While the program is therapeutic in nature, it incorporates a model of social therapy. Social therapy is not traditional in that participants work together to create an environment where everyone is able to perform and create new play while learning from their various interactions.

In terms of measurable outcomes, the Advisory Committee has set what would seem to be modest goals; that participants complete the program and that the program "does no harm" to participants. According to the Willows Advisory Committee, the life experiences of participants often translate into emotional and behavioural challenges, which interfere with their ability to attend and be successful in other community recreational and/or arts programs.

In addition to considering these basic outcomes, the study taps into the perspectives and opinions of key stakeholder groups, including program staff and volunteers, Advisory Committee members, parents or guardians of participants and participants themselves. Anecdotal evidence of positive behavioural outcomes are compared with outcomes from similar programs operating in Toronto and internationally.

The report provides an overview of the methodology used in the study, the evolution and operation of the program, and findings from consultations with key stakeholders. A set of conclusions are also included, based on a synthesis of findings.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

The evaluation design incorporated a number of qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand the value and impact of the Under the Willows Program. Secondary research included a review of relevant literature and a document review. Literature relevant to the Willows program included reports on two similar programs; the Spiral Garden in Toronto and the Butterfly Garden in Sri Lanka. In addition to related programs, the literature review also considered a model of social therapy developed through the Eastside Institute in New York. The approach employed by staff and volunteers of the Under the Willows Program draws heavily on this proven model.

With respect to the document review, a number of sources were used. Documents reviewed included past minutes of the Advisory Committee, copies of past grant proposals, newsletters and registration forms for current and past participants in the program.

Primary research fell into three distinct categories, including consultations with key stakeholder groups, direct observation and pre-post assessments of participant behavior. Each of these methods is described in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.1 Consultations with Key Stakeholder Groups

Consultations with key stakeholder groups made up the bulk of the research design. Specifically, consultations were held with the Advisory Committee, program staff and volunteers, participants in the program and their parents or guardian.

Consultations with the Advisory Committee were conducted as focus groups and were built in to regular monthly meetings. The first focus group discussion, held in April of 2008, centered on various policies and processes associated with the program, including participant selection, dealing with conflict and staffing. The second discussion was conducted in January 2009, and was based on a review of the draft report. In addition to general feedback on the draft report, the discussion focused on potential recommendations emerging from research findings.

Focus group discussions were also held with staff and volunteers in two separate groups. On the Monday following the last week of the program, staff came together to debrief. Coordinators and staff reviewed the successes and challenges they faced in working with individual participants in the program. The researcher also had an opportunity to facilitate a discussion around general themes related to program dynamics, behavioral shifts among participants and lessons learned. A similar focus group with three of the four program volunteers was conducted in January 2009.

While the researcher was on-site conducting direct observation of the program, he had an opportunity to interview program participants one-on-one. Conversations were brief and informal, focusing on what the participant felt was most fun and least fun about the program.

In September 2008, two months after the end of the program, interviews were conducted with parents or guardians of program participants. In total 15 telephone interviews were conducted, representing a response rate of 68%. A simple semi-structured interview format was developed for this consultation.

### 2.2 Direct Observation

In order to establish a first-hand account of the program in full operation, two researchers were on-site for a morning and afternoon at about the mid-point of the program. Given the nature of the program, it was important that the researchers be integrated into "the story". It was also important that the researchers not be seen as outsiders that were "studying" the participants, as this would run counter to the principle of 'do no harm'.

The researchers were 'in costume' and introduced as visitors "trying to find fun". This was a useful pretext as it helped to initiate conversations with program participants (e.g. "We are looking for fun. Have you found fun here?"). Observations focused on group dynamics, participant engagement and conflict resolution.

### 2.3 Pre-Post Assessments of Participant Behavior

The pre-post assessment of participant behavior was the only quantitative method incorporated into the research design. Each staff person was assigned two to three participants to report on at the end of the first week of programming and again at the end of the fourth week. Each participant was assessed by two different staff persons, in order to assess inter rater reliability.

The assessment tool considered four behavioral dimensions, including: communication, interaction with staff and volunteers, interaction with other participants, and engagement in activities. Staff were asked to assign a rating from 1 to 10 on each dimension at two points in time, as well as general comments about the rating.

Unfortunately, given some unforeseen logistical issues, the validity of these findings were compromised. By the end of the first week, individual staff did not always have an opportunity to adequately observe a particular participant and report accurately on their behaviour. This of course made it impossible to accurately assess any behavioural shifts by the end of the program. While a revised approach is being developed for next year's session of Under the Willows, findings from this research method are not included in this report.

## 3.0 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This section of the report provides an overview and traces the evolution of the Under the Willows program. It also considers similar programs operating in other jurisdictions nationally and internationally, as well as underlying models of social development. Findings are based on consultations with Willows Advisory Committee members, a review of related literature and documents produced by Under the Willows staff and advisors over the past 5 years.

### 3.1 Program Overview

Under the Willows is a summer arts garden and play program that takes place for four weeks during the month of July. This outdoor program is set under nine mature willow trees on the West mountain property of Lynwood Hall Child and Family Centre. The program has been operating for the past six years, and serves children 6 to 14 who suffer the "invisible" disabilities arising from adverse life circumstances; including family violence, disrupted living circumstances, mental health issues, abuse and neglect.

Many of the children that attend the Under the Willows program also live in poverty, which adds further complication to their lives. These "invisible" disabilities translate into emotional and behavioural challenges, which interfere with the ability to attend and be successful in mainstream arts and recreational programs.

While offering a range of activities the program is essentially self directed, where children attend the activity stations that they feel most drawn to. They may stay as long as they wish, and are free to cycle between several stations throughout the course of the day. For those children who are not engaged at a station, 'weaver' artists provide support and re-direction to individual art, gardening or drama activities, or develop an alternative activity with the child.

At the beginning of the day children participate in open art and gardening activities. Music circle officially starts the morning, and ends with station artists presenting their activities for the day. Some examples of art stations that run throughout the program include; oceans of potions, clay world, drama-dress-up, "big art" (murals and totem poles), "small art" (sonic flags, periscopes, whirligigs, hats). A healthy, whole foods lunch is prepared by children who choose to attend the food preparation station that includes herbs and flowers cultivated from the garden. Art stations continue throughout the afternoon, and children are brought together for a final music circle before they leave for the day.

In addition to a range of activities, participants are engaged in fantasy and mystery through a "story" that evolves through the course of the program. Characters arrive to deliver clues and messages about the story that emerges each summer with the help of the children's input and direction. Guest artists also visit, facilitating art stations and projects that culminate in a closing ceremony at the end of the program.

Given the complex behaviours of participants and number of activities occurring simultaneously, the program requires a large number of staff and volunteers. The ratio of program participants to staff/volunteers is almost two to one.

Outside of the four weeks that the program is actually up and running, there are other opportunities to engage children and families. During the mid winter season, Willows staff and volunteers are on site planting seeds with the children from the day treatment program. They

are back again in the spring for the "big dig", the annual community planting day, when the gardens are prepared. Children, primarily those living at or attending day treatment classes of the Lynwood Hall site, are engaged in both of these activities. A series of spring workshops are also conducted with children from Lynwood Hall. The children are also included in preparing the garden for winter at the Great Fall Clean-Up in November.

This provides a taste of the types of activities and experiences involved in the full range of programs.

### 3.2 Evolution of the Program

As with the introduction of many unique and innovative programs, there is a concept and a champion to apply that concept to a local context. For more than thirty years, the champion, Dr. Ruth Pickering, worked as a child psychiatrist, and for the past 17 years worked with some of the most challenging cases in Hamilton's children's mental health, education, child welfare and women's shelter systems. In 1994, Dr. Pickering had the opportunity to participate in a workshop sponsored by the Spiral Garden program in Toronto, an arts, garden and play program that became the inspiration for Under the Willows.

For almost seven years, a local steering committee held the vision of bringing the Spiral Garden concept to Hamilton. In 2003 the Steering Committee was dissolved and an Advisory committee established to oversee the two-year pilot project.

Over the years, Under the Willows has attracted a lot of interest and attention in the community, which has translated into in-kind and financial contributions to support the operation of the program. Funders included the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Hamilton Community Foundation, TD Friends of the Environment, National Crime Prevention Centre (Public Safety Canada), the Zonta Club of Hamilton, Retired Women Teachers of Ontario, Kiwanis Club of Hamilton, and many local small businesses.

In addition to financial contributions, countless individuals and groups have donated materials as well as their time and talent to build sculptures, design gardens, construct permanent shelters on the site and to prepare the site each summer for a new group of children. The program has truly been a community effort.

The site now boasts one permanent structure, a cedar tea house, as well as two sheltered activity structures that can be dismantled at the end of the season. Future site development plans include a stream through the site, a wind turbine, a traditional tipi, rain barrels, compost bins and a common lunch table where all staff, volunteers, guests and participants can sit together.

In terms of future directions, the advisory committee is exploring a number of potential community partnerships that could result in an expansion of the program.

### 3.3 Related Programs and Theories of Development

Nationally and internationally there are only a handful of documented programs that operate from the same general philosophies as the Under the Willows program. The origin of this type

of programming lies in the Spiral Garden, a program provided through the Bloorview MacMillan Children's Centre in Toronto Ontario (Bloorview MacMillan Children's Centre; 2005).

The Spiral Garden was established in 1984 and has been operating for twenty five years. Originally designed for children with disabilities, the program is now open to all children and families. In its early days, the program served 12 to 15 participants. Twenty five years later about 250 children are engaged in the program annually.

As a result of the popularity of the Spiral Garden, the Cosmic Bird Feeder, a similar program operating on a second Bloorview MacMillan Centre site, was established in 1997. An interest in having this type of programming year round resulted in the creation of The Studio in 2006.

These programs operate from a philosophy that encourages participants to create and promote meaningful relationships with the natural world in their own lives as well as in the lives of others in their community. This connection with the natural world is the context for healing children, community members, and the earth itself. The three central aspects to these programs, Arts, Garden, and Play, are vehicles that bridge the imagination, nature, and social interaction.

As outlined in their annual report, part of the philosophy of the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Bird Feeder is as follows:

> *The Spiral Garden and Cosmic Bird Feeder are open fields of Play where children and adults alike can enter into the continuous flow of creation. With a creative mind, an open heart, and a joyful spirit we surrender ourselves to the spontaneity of the moment. Through play we find and fulfill our place and role in the unfolding of the universe.*
>
> *Each of these three aspects; Arts, Garden, and Play, are (re)united together in dynamic synthesis. The intentional way we use Story to bring these elements together is key to understanding our unique process…*
>
> (Bloorview MacMillan Children's Centre; 2005)

This passage describes the importance of "story" to the program. While skills development and learning may come from the specific arts and gardening activities involved in the program, the story creates a context. Creating a fantastical context allows for creative interpretations of activities and connects all aspects of the program.

Activity ranges from puppetry to nature walks; from crafts to drama dress up. Food figures prominently in the programs, much of which is either grown or prepared on site with the help of participants. Participants are free to engage in an activity for as long as they want (space permitting) or move to other activities.

Outcomes or impacts of the programs are not measured through rigorous evaluation methods. This in fact would undermine the true nature of the program. Anecdotal research conducted with staff however, suggests a number of positive outcomes.

Communicative and expressive language was identified as a significant outcome of these programs. The report suggest that this is accomplished by creating and expressing within an art and garden context with peers, where children are able to verbalize their likes, dislikes, insights and observations.

As the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Birdfeeder work with participants on a number of occasions over several years they are able to build trusting relationships that help create a space where children experience growth and success in these programs. As children are given the opportunity to meet and play with other children from diverse backgrounds they build new friendships and discover new ways of being and doing. Song and art also help to build continuity and community for the children.

The report provides an example of how the repetition of a song has proved to help children recognize and learn the words; for children who were quiet and withdrawn, they began to participate in these activities and proved that they had been taking everything in all along. Using techniques such as clay and beading children have proven that they are able to learn new skills and apply them later on during the program in a different context; this is possible as they have been given the time to become familiar with and master the activity, and gain confidence and a sense of ownership in their abilities.

Another program that has its roots in the Spiral Garden is the Butterfly Garden in Batticaloa, Sir Lanka (Chase, 2000). The Butterfly Garden works with children who have been affected by the Sri Lankan North East Civil War. This program is a 'peace garden' for war-affected schoolchildren and uses imagination, creative play, community caring and reconciliation, and healing to help rehabilitate these children.

Earthwork, Artwork, Heartwork, and Healing are used to achieve self-integration through creativity. Earthwork is defined as engaging with one's physical environment – the garden teaches the children lessons of cause and effect and life and death using plants and animals; Artwork allows children to explore and express creative energy within themselves – through painting, musical instruments, and acting; Heartwork occurs when children address questions vital to their need for growth – when children are able to express emotions and life themes through creation and performance through relationships with their environment and themselves; Healing occurs when a child is able to address their own suffering – through artistic engagement with images and symbols to express feelings, memories and tensions of their own inner distress.

An evaluation of the Butterfly Garden occurred during the third program cycle from April 1998 to May 1999 (Chase, 2000). During this time approximately 150 children attended the program regularly, and came from six different Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Of these 150 children, 20 children with significant behavioural and emotional problems were selected and were offered piloted trauma-healing activities.

At the beginning of the program these children participated in an initial genogram activity with a counsellor, which was followed by expressive art activities with an animator. Near the end of the program the children completed a second genogram for re-assessment. This activity allowed these children to, for the first time, express and feel relief from their traumatic stories and burden. Other children who had experienced similar situations were able to find group support here.

Positive effect on the mental well being for the majority of the children was demonstrated. During the follow-up genogram session more profound and insightful material was evoked and children were more forthcoming with their thoughts, feelings and attitudes. In conjunction with the genogram game, socialization opportunities helped children to reach out to more people.

The children's confidence was found to have improved which aided in their functioning and abilities at home and at school.

The author discusses the observations that suggest increased happiness among program participants, a sense of confidence and initiative to share their own stories and feelings with staff and children, as well as changes in their courage, humor, inventiveness and inner resiliency.

Chase describes a specific evaluation tool that was used to rate happiness, which is a continuum from zero to six and is based on observed behaviors demonstrated by the child. Chase discusses how evaluation for this program and its contribution to healing children affected by war trauma cannot be done in one year alone but requires a longitudinal approach which will follow children and communities for several years.

In terms of social development models, the Therapy, developed by Fred Newman and Lois Holzman's is most consistent with approach used in the Under the Willows program. Newman discusses how social therapy is traditional in the sense that people come to the therapy to receive help with emotional problems, but it is not traditional in that clients work together to create an environment where everyone is able to perform and create new play. For many professionals, social therapy delivers a new method for relating to people as active creators in their lives in relation to who they are and who they are becoming (Robinson, 2004).

Rather than seeing the client as passive, or as a diagnostic category it demands the understanding that "you are not your disease" but are a complex person who can perform "other than who they are". A social therapy group sees the group as a community, and works towards building that community – to develop a way to be in the world.

Fred Newman, founder of the East Side Institute, playwright, and doctor of philosophy, believes in change through performance – behaviour and/or expression that is demonstrated through an awareness of choosing what one is doing or saying. Social therapy is described as a postmodern approach to change based on Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

There is no focus on the past, but rather on the present, and one is seen as developing by "doing what we don't know how to do", and by becoming "who we are not" through the use of performance. Social therapists discuss how 'who we are' is a process of society and exists only within relationships. Although social therapy begins as short-term individual work, it moves into group work, where the group is considered as greater than the sum of its parts. As the group changes, so do individuals, and this impacts their interaction in their own relationships in the world.

Newman's and Holman's social theory emphasizes the importance of performance and process as activities of social change, and view social life as one of the key material bases of human experience. They suggest the importance of studying performances as activity, as they are what comprise one's environment, and can transform and create new forms of social life.

## 4.0 PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Under the Willows participants are referred equally from each of the three partner agencies, including the Lynwood Hall, Interval House and the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton. Liaisons at each agency begin the selection process in April, anticipating a July start. Liaisons begin assembling lists of potential participants, which are reviewed in consultation with program coordinators.

Ultimately, each of the three partner agencies will refer 8 participants to the program; four previous participants and four new participants. Including past participants was a strategic decision made prior to the 2006 program. Each year the program coordinators noted a number of children with a special gift for imagination and creativity despite challenging behaviours. These children were enthusiastic participants, the source of many inventive developments and contributed significantly to the richness of an emerging "Willows culture". Including a mix of experienced and new Willows participants has shown to create a successful group dynamic.

The following section of the report describes a typical populations served by each of three partner agencies. It also provides profile of the 2008 program participants, based on "attendee description forms" completed by the referring agency.

### 4.1 Participant Profile

Children under treatment in the Lynwood Hall programs suffer from multiple emotional and behavioral challenges. Some experience low self-esteem and mood swings, and many experience chronic school failure (behavioral and academic). Many are either aggressive or violent in their homes and/or communities and consequently are not able to attend most mainstream community programs.

The children who come from Interval House (a local women's shelter) are often unable to attend any kind of camp or after-school programs due to safety and/or financial concerns. Under the Willows is set up to be accessible to these children, while providing an extremely high quality arts-based outdoor program. Many of these children come from homes where they have witnessed and/or experienced violence directly. The programming of the project is developed with great sensitivity to the challenges and pain these children may be facing, offering not only support, but creative opportunities for self- expression and validation of their competencies, often suppressed in situations of family violence.

The children attending from the Catholic Children's Aid Society also suffer from the effects of trauma and abuse in their lives. They have experienced the harmful effects of the inappropriate use of power and control in their lives, and many of them either tend to be "passive recipients" in their lives or, alternately, attempt to use power and control tactics in their relationships. They too, can safely enter into the activities of the Under the Willows program knowing they are emotionally safe in the garden space where they are free to experience the activities within a context of mutual relationships and positive role models.

Along with a registration form, partner agencies submit a non identifying attendee description form for each participant. These forms provide detail on the child's experiences, living arrangements and their medical and emotional status.

Of the 22 children participating in the 2008 summer program, 80% witnessed some type of domestic violence; 30% had experienced some type of abuse, either physical, psychological or sexual, and; 30% had experienced neglect. In terms of medical and emotional status, 40% of participants were diagnosed or showed characteristics of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD). With respect to living arrangements, 70% come from lone parent families living at home, 10% were living with their mother in a women's shelter, 10% were living with other relatives as guardians while 10% lived with both parents at home.

### 4.2 Participant Feedback

While on-site observing the program, the researcher had an opportunity to interview some of the participants. In keeping with the nature of the program, and the policy that all visitors must integrate themselves into the story in order to maintain the integrity of the program, the researcher, dressed in a funny hat, was introduced as an explorer who was looking for "fun".

This character and introduction were effective in providing a natural start of a conversation with participants – "I am looking for fun...have you found any fun here under the willows?" Conversations were informal and covered such topics as what was most fun?; What was least fun?; What have they learned? What would they change?

The researcher met with participants individually or in pairs as they moved between activity stations. While conversations were brief and not always focused, feedback was almost always positive. The children were clearly engaged in the story and talked excitedly about a new sculpture that appeared on the site that morning. While each had their own favorite activities, meal preparation stood out as a real 'privilege' among many participants. Participants were very proud of the crafts they had made, and were excited to bring them home to their families.

Any negative comments made by participants were related to specific incidents that occurred earlier that day and not to the program generally. When asked what they would change, participants had no shortage of ideas, including a castle with a draw bridge and moat.

## 5.0 THE PROGRAM

This section of the report highlights some of the defining features of the program that help to create a unique and powerful experience among participants. The site itself is critical, and changes annually, based on new developments as well as the story it must maintain. The "story", the second feature to be discussed, begins on day one and evolves through the course of the program.

Effectively staffing the program is also key to its success. This section of the report describes the specific staff and volunteer positions built into the program, as well as an overview of the orientation and training provided. Finally, we will look at conflict transformation and the principles and protocols used to manage aggression in the program.

### 5.1 The Site

As described in the project overview, Under the Willows is an outdoor program set under nine mature willow trees on the property of Lynwood Hall Child and Family Centre on Hamilton's West Mountain. The site has evolved over the years, with the support of local funders and volunteers.

From the early days when tents provided shelter, the site now boasts one permanent structure (a cedar tea house), as well as two sheltered activity structures that can be dismantled at the end of the season. Future site development plans include a stream through site, which is hooked up to pump in sand box, a wind turbine, a traditional tipi, rain barrels, compost bins and a common lunch table where all staff, volunteers, guests and children participants can sit together.

In terms of physical layout, a circle of logs and stumps for seats appears in the centre of the site, where the morning gathering and music circle are held. Outside and around the circle are various activity stations, including different types of arts and crafts, the garden and sandbox and meal preparation. A bridge with an elaborate entry way creates a path to the site.

In addition to the permanent or practical structures, other features appear and evolve on the site. These features are generally connected to the story that is woven through the program. A large boulder may appear on the site one morning (is it a dinosaur egg?); or a giant globe made of branches and vines is found hanging from a tree. These features create mystery and help to propel the story forward through the course of the program.

### 5.2 The Story

Building a story involves creating a living Willows culture of events and characters. As new features appear on the site, questions are raised. Sometimes characters appear on the scene with clues to the mysteries, while other time participants themselves define the events emerging around them.

The following vignette is a real example of how story is used to create mystery and fantasy, and to engage participants at levels beyond the day-to-day activities.

*Harold to the Rescue...*
*Beset by air and fire dragons, an urgent call for assistance was sent out to Harold the Herald. Days later, battered and bewildered, Harold burst into Music Circle, missing an eye (which fortunately was found a few days later) but eager to help.*

*He had been traveling far and wide. In his travels he had come across some fire and air Dragons, weeping for their children. Harold was told that Under the willows was a traditional site for Laying the dragons'( invisible) eggs, but that since they lay their eggs once in a thousand years, and the site was now crowded with busy, happy children, some of the eggs were being crushed by accident or misadventure.*

*Once dragons lay their eggs, they are unable to protect them until they hatch, so they need helpers on the ground to protect them from danger. Harold and the children set out to find ways to communicate with the dragons and to find and protect the eggs. Messages to and from the dragons appeared under tables, beneath the flowers and in the dirt. Children fashioned "dragon eyes" in Clayworld to assist in "seeing" the eggs, potions were concocted to reveal their location, and beautiful markers made by the children, enabled them to collect and re-locate the eggs into the Dreaming Lodge, where treasures had been also collected for the dragon babies.*

*Fido, the Finger Worm, who had hitched a ride in Harold's armor, revealed that there were likely many baby finger worms around the garden, and that contact with humans helped them become more lively. Fido shared that the King Finger Worm was looking for a mate, and might be coming to Willows as he was lonely. Sure enough, one morning, we came on site to see the picnic table overturned and evidence of slime near the music circle which led to several Finger Worm burrows! Although King FW did not appear on site, he left a number of messages, the last one saying that he had been so impressed with the steel drum band at Willows, he had gone to the Caribbean to learn how to drum. Over the next week or so, many young finger worms were hatched and grew, and the final day we all shared in a Finger Worm Naming Ceremony with food and music and parading around in costumes - drawing another summer to a close.*

Ruth Pickering. Under the Willows Newsletter, November 2005

**5.3 Staffing and Training**

Effective staffing is critical to the success of the program, and staff are hired not only based on their artistic skills, but also on their compatibility with the whole staff group as well as the participants attending that session. As a result, working with the program one year does not guarantee a position in the future.

The ratio between participants and staff/volunteers is generally 2:1. While this ratio makes the program more costly, it is important given some of the complex behaviours of participants. While some staff assume positions as "Coordinator" or "Director" many decisions are made by consensus. Regular staff debriefing sessions occur where staff and volunteers weigh in on how to proceed with a particular situation or participant.

The volunteer Program Director assumes a role similar to a producer or production manager, overseeing all aspects of the program and intervening as necessary. She secures resources

necessary to support the work of the artistic director and other staff and facilitates an emotional and physical environment conducive to the efficient workings of the program.

The Artistic Director role is similar to a director on a film, creating and sustaining the artistic aesthetic, and coordinating the 'actors' (staff) in order to ensure a smooth production. The Artistic Director leads the process of recruiting artists to the program. He conducts music circle, develops and facilitates the daily schedule, and conducts orientation sessions for the partner agencies, potential participants and their parents/guardians. He develops a week-long artist orientation/training protocol which addresses the integration of the arts, garden and play elements with approaches to transformation of conflict. These elements are revisited and integrated with the arts, garden and story elements on artist planning days each week.

The Gardener creates and implements a vision for the garden for the upcoming year. He/She coordinates the work on the garden to ensure that segments of the work are left for the participants to work on during program (ideally activities that they can carry out on their own with minimal supervision). The Gardener also coordinates the activities and volunteers that take part in the "big dig". This includes edging the garden beds, weeding, planting vegetables, planting edible flowers, add compost and/or manure, mulching beds, weaving the willow fence and willow shelter, and topping up sandbox.

When funding is available, an administrative assistant is hired to act as a liaison between partner agencies, take minutes at advisory committee meetings, produce and update relevant documents, coordinate fundraising events and pursue program funding.

In total there are six artist positions. Artists may take on a number of specific roles. Some will facilitate a specific activity or art station such as drama dress up, clay world or food preparation. Other artists, known as "Weavers", do not facilitate a specific activity or art station. Instead, they float around the site, working with participants who are not engaged in a structured activity.

Depending on the number of participants in a particular session, four to five volunteers are also incorporated into the staff team. Program volunteers often act as "runners" for artists. They help to receive and orient participants in the morning and match them with rides at the end of the day. They provide support and supervision during lunch, assist with lunch clean-up, and help to direct participants toward activity stations. When they are not otherwise engaged, they participate in the activity areas with the children. During lunch break they may offer a craft or game activity for the kids.

Given the complexity of the program and program participants, staff and volunteers participate in an extensive week-long orientation session. Prior to the orientation week, artists attend a preliminary training day. This gives all the staff a chance to meet each other for the first time and to begin some of the team building and conflict transformation training that will continue during Orientation Week.

During orientation week, staff and volunteers cover a lot of ground. The orientation program includes a history of the garden, learning of songs, team building exercises, preparation of site, making mock-ups of art that the children can make, and reviewing policies and procedures.

Training in conflict resolution is also a key component of the orientation. Training is based on the Prevention & Management of Aggressive Behaviour (PMAB) model. PMAB is a safe, non-aggressive behaviour management system designed to aid staff members working and caring for youth who experience difficulty in controlling their behaviour. The training provides an

understanding of the roots of aggressive behaviour, how to identify it and prevent it. There are always two staff on site who are trained to intervene with aggressive behaviours.

### 5.4 Conflict Transformation

In order to minimize the impact of violence or aggressive behaviour in the program, a "violence in space" policy was developed. According to this policy, confrontations are dealt with based on the following principles:

- Violence begets more violence.
- Violence is any action (whether verbal, physical or other) that causes harm to another being.
- Violence always has a negative impact on 'perpetrators,' and is always part of a chain of previous violence.
- All acts of violence carry within them their own negative impact (or punishment).

All actors in a conflict (including the 'perpetrator,' the 'victim,' and witnesses) are considered victims of 'trouble' or violence. In these cases the individuals are separated and allowed to tell their story; there is no blame. Traditional approaches, which involve the notion of good guy/bad guy (involving punishment or sanctioning of the bad guy, and comfort and support for the good guy) are not utilized by staff.

The following vignette is based on events that occurred during the 2008 program. It helps to show how creativity is used to diffuse potential conflict situations. It also demonstrates the concept of an 'emergent curriculum', where the direction of the story and related activities shift with emerging events.

> *Transforming Trouble*
> *Common sense would suggest that three foot sticks have no place in a children's summer program. However, recognizing the intensity of feelings of the two boys in conflict over ownership of this stick (discovered on site the first day) presented the opportunity for a creative solution. Initially we had no idea that this would transform the activities and "story" of the 2008 program.*
>
> *This small story illustrates some of the "Willows" methods: following the lead of the children, working with what they have an interest in, and transforming conflict into story, activities and emotional learning. Our first (unsuccessful) inclination was to discourage and distract the boys from the sticks, while setting guidelines about their safe carrying and use. Those of us who work with children with the level of emotional turmoil these youngsters demonstrate, recognize that this intensity of "attachment" [e.g. to the sticks] often represents some deep emotional need, and that simply "banning" the sticks will not lead to anything but constant power struggles between staff and kids. This, in turn can intensify the internal emotional struggles these children bring with them.*
>
> *This brief account does not do justice to the intense discussion among staff, the hard work in keeping the use of the sticks creative, non-violent and safe and the continuous work with the one boy who was most intense about his need for THIS stick. This child, persistent, demanding, frustrated when he couldn't get his way right away, often stormed off in a temper, convinced that no one would help him*

*and that no one liked him. Each time, with the support of staff, he did return to work with the artists, eventually transforming his stick into a "Dragon Stick". This was fitted with wings (that had been woven by children at Willows in 2005), thus becoming King Dragon. By the final week many small and large Dragon sticks had hatched from an enormous egg that appeared one morning high in the tree over Music Circle. On the final day, King Dragon flew high above our heads in the new Tea House during the final Celebration and Stage performances.*

*Some of the emotional learning made possible for this youngster (and us all) were that none of us gave up on him and that we worked hard with him to get him what he needed, while working hard to keep all the children safe and creatively occupied. He also learned that the stick was transformed by him with the aid of several staff and children (2005); that it became "his", but not until he allowed it to be part of the final day's celebration of our Willows community. Many had participated in the creation of "King Dragon" and we deserved to enjoy his presence. (We made a deal with him that when he allowed "his" dragon to be present the last day, he would then get to take it home).*
*Despite this youngster's short attention span, his easy frustration, his beliefs that no one would help him or keep their promises to him, as well as his intense belief that his dragon would never be completed, he also became fully engaged in a variety of Willows activities. Drama Dress up, the "rock group", The Two Daniels (with our Artistic Director, Daniel Allen), and as the creator of King Dragon, this proud youngster was photographed with his creation before he took it home to show his grandfather who also carved dragons out of logs. This small "success story" demonstrates a bit of how we work with and for the children at Under the Willows … where children grow!*

Dr. Ruth Pickering, December 2008

## 6.0 STAFF PERSPECTIVES

Two distinct methods were used to elicit staff insights and perspectives, a focus group held at the end of the program and through behavioural assessment forms completed by staff at the beginning and end of the program. Program volunteers were also consulted through a similar focus group format. This section of the report provides an overview of findings from each of these methods.

A focus group consultation was conducted with program staff at the end of the program. The focus group was held as part of a previously scheduled debriefing session with staff, facilitated by the Program Director and Artistic Director. The researcher was able to attend the debriefing session, which provided some interesting observations. Following the debrief the researcher was able to follow up on some previous comments and focus the discussion on general trends and dynamics observed throughout the program.

During the debriefing session Dr. Pickering, the Program Director, led the group through a discussion of each participant. She started the discussions by sharing with the staff some of the clinical assessments and labels assigned to each participant by the referring agencies. In almost every case the staff were shocked by these labels and assessments, as they were not consistent with their own observations over the course of the program.

This begs the question: would the staff have treated participants differently had they known of their labels and clinical assessments prior to the program? Given that the perceptions of staff were inconsistent with the clinical assessments however, suggests that the environment and approaches used in the Under the Willows program had the effect of reducing or transforming behaviours that were evident in a more clinical setting.

Following the debriefing, the researcher focused the discussion to identify common themes among the behavioural dynamics of participants. Through the course of discussion, three distinct themes emerged that were confirmed by staff including: a shift from bullying to cooperative behaviour; less emphasis on ownership, and; that the program provided a safe space for expression and play.

Staff described a number of participants for whom bullying was their main approach to interacting with their peers. Over the course of the program they saw drastic reductions in these behaviours and attributed this to the approaches used in conflict transformation. Bullying behaviour simply did not result in the same outcomes that they were used to. There was not the predictable "punishment" nor was there any sense of superiority. The most desirable responses they learned came from more cooperative behaviour.

A similar theme emerged around some participant's sense of ownership. Again, the approaches used by staff and the communal culture of the program helped to deter the need to "own" items or take them from others. By helping all participants to develop a sense of community and communal ownership of the space and resources, "ownership" of an item did not hold the same value. A good example of this is presented in the conflict transformation vignette that appears in section 5.4 of this report.

The third theme that emerged was that the program provided a safe space for expression and play. Staff described a number of participants whose demeanor at the beginning of the program was very serious and intense. Through the course of the program this intensity 'softened' and they were able to feel comfortable and "play" like children. Staff recounted that one boy, who

was particularly serious and macho in his behaviour, was engaging in drama dress up by the end of the program. A number of staff agreed that they would not have predicted this at the beginning of the program.

## 7.0 PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

This section of the report provides an overview of findings from consultations with parents/guardians of Under the Willows participants. In September 2008, approximately six weeks after the end of the program, parents or guardians of participants were consulted via telephone interviews. In total, fifteen parents/guardians participated in interviews for a response rate of 68%.

A simple interview guide containing four questions was used in the consultations. The questions were designed to elicit perspectives on the value of the program, whether the program had any positive impacts on the child, if they would send the child to program in the future and what recommendations they might have to improve the program. A thematic analysis was then conducted on interview responses. This involves identifying common themes within a set of responses.

The first question asked during the interviews was "Overall, do you think that the Under the Willows program was a positive experience for [your child]?" Several participants observed common behavioral changes. The dominant theme that emerged was related to developing friendship and social interaction. Participants discussed how Under the Willows helped their children increase their use of positive social skills through providing the opportunities to interact with other children and develop new friendships.

As one parent/guardian reported, "*My child "was able to make friends, which is normally really hard for him to do".* This program also created opportunities to generate valuable discussion between the child and their parents and guardians. As one respondent recounted, *"It gave him something to talk about with us... normally he does not talk to us about what happens during his day".*

Another theme emerging from responses to this question was related to arts and creativity. It was noted that the children had positive experiences at the program as a result of the arts and crafts components. Some respondents noted that the children were given the freedom to be creative and use their imagination at Under the Willows. Others noted how the program provided a new and creative way to help children learn and appreciate plants and nature.

Parents and guardians also described how Under the Willows gave the children opportunities to be "active" and "engaged". The program gave the children a variety of activities to do. Being at Willows provided children the opportunity to be busy and productive in the summer, and prevented them from getting into any trouble or mischief. It also provided a positive routine.

The second question asked during the consultation was "did you see any changes in [your child's] behaviour, either positive or negative, as a result of participating in the program?" Here, the most dominant theme that emerged was the idea of interaction and relationships. Parents/guardians discussed how the program improved their children's interactions with their siblings, parents and others. They discussed how they observed the children trying harder at being more polite towards their siblings and parents. They also noted that the children's listening skills had improved.

Again, parents/guardians described how their children were able to connect through conversation about their experiences and the activities that they participated in at Under the Willows. As one parent/guardian recalled, *"She would talk to (us) about the camp for days... the experience seemed to really stay with her"*

Another area that parents and guardians noticed change was in general disposition. It was reported that their children generally "happier" and more outgoing. One respondent reported that their child felt special when given the opportunity to go to camp: *He felt "treated, like he was getting a special treat when he went to camp".* Another parent/guardian reflecting on their child's behaviour reported that *"(She) would come home singing.".* Several children would regularly teach their siblings and parents/guardians the songs and games that they learned that day at camp.

Another theme that emerged from this question was related to thinking and learning. In some cases, children were able to look at things differently and consider others' points of view. As one parent/guardian recounted "*He was able to look and think of things differently. (He) became more open-minded to the ideas of others, and more accepting of others' ideas".* Others gained a great interest in wanting to learn about plants and nature. One parent noted an increase in interest and ability to help out with chores around the house.

The third question asked was "If you had the opportunity, would you send [your child] to the Under the Willows program next year?" An overwhelming majority of parents agreed that they would, and reiterated the positive impacts of the program on their child's behaviour as well as their child's enjoyment of the program. As one parent/guardian reported, "*She" was upset that the program was over, she wanted it to be longer!"*

In only two cases, parents/guardians were not willing to send their children back to camp next year. In both cases however, reasons were not related to the program itself. One parent/guardian is choosing not to send the child due to her own unresolved issues with her biological brother, and the other is not going back because of a distance issue.

To conclude the interview, parents/guardians were asked "Do you have any other comments about the program or ideas about how the program might be improved?" One parent suggested a "what to talk to your kid about" sheet for parents and guardians, to inform them as to what their children are doing at camp. It was thought that this would help to generate more discussion with children. Another parent mentioned going on a field trip somewhere and incorporating water activities into the program on really hot days.

## 8.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Incorporating input and feedback from a range of key stakeholders, the report describes the evolution and operation of the Under the Willows Program, and identifies some of the impacts of the program on participants and the community. While the program has been operating since 2003, consultations were conducted with advisors, staff, participants and parents/guardians from the 2008 session.

As stated in the introduction, Willows Program advisors maintain the modest goals of seeing participants through to the completion of the program and to do no harm. Simply participating through the duration of the program is however a significant success according to program advisors. The behavioural challenges of many participants interfere with their ability to attend and successfully complete community recreational and/or arts programs. In terms of the2008 session of the Under the Willows program, all of the 22 participants attended from beginning to end.

While the notion of 'do no harm' is more difficult to measure, we can first look to the program design. Participants are given a lot of independence in terms of choosing how they want to engage with the program. In this sense, participants engage with the program on their own terms and are not forced into a schedule that might cause stress or anxiety. When researchers were on site conducting direct observations, it was important that they not be seen as outsiders that were "studying" the participants. This would also undermine the principle of 'do no harm'.

Additional evidence that the program did no harm to its vulnerable participants can be found in the feedback from parents and guardians. During telephone interviews, parents and guardians of program participants were asked "Overall, do you think that the Under the Willows program was a positive experience for [your child]?" Respondents were then asked to elaborate on any positive or negative aspects of the Willows experience. Of the 15 interviews completed, none of the respondents had any negative feedback with respect to their child's experience.

In terms of positive impacts, findings suggest that the Under the Willows program has achieved some of the same positive outcomes that have been observed through similar programs including the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Birdfeeder in Toronto and the Butterfly Garden in Sri Lanka. As with Under the Willows, outcomes or impacts of these programs are not measured through rigorous evaluation methods. This would undermine the true nature of the program and potentially cause harm to participants. The fact that key stakeholders of respective programs observed similar outcomes however, increases both the validity and reliability of findings.

According to parents/guardians of Willows participants, the program increased communication and positive interactions with family and friends. Specifically, the children were observed to be more polite and better listeners. Improved communication was also a theme that emerged from consultations with staff at the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Bird Feeder programs in Toronto. Staff reported that expressive language was a significant outcome, where participants were better able to verbalize their likes, dislikes insights and observations.

The general disposition of participants was also impacted by the Willows program. According to parents and guardians, the children were seen to be happier and more outgoing. Staff described a number of participants whose demeanor at the beginning of the program was very serious and intense. Through the course of the program this intensity 'softened' and they were able to feel comfortable and "play" like children. Observations of participants in Sri Lanka's

Butterterfly Garden Program revealed similar outcomes. Participants were seen to have increased their confidence and their sense of humor.

Parents and guardians of Willows participants observed that some children developed the ability to look at things differently, and consider others points of view. This was viewed as a significant outcome as many of the participants simply did not have this level of 'mental flexibility' prior to the program.

Finally, according to parents and guardians, some children developed an interest and attraction toward gardening and nature. Not surprising, given the focus of the program, staff and volunteers made similar observations.

In addition to facilitating the development of a number of positive behaviours, the Willows program also had the effect of reducing a number of antisocial behaviours. Specifically, staff and volunteers reported a reduction in the negative behaviours of bullying and possessiveness over the course of the program

Staff and volunteers described a number of participants who, at the beginning of the program, used bullying as their main approach to interacting with their peers. Over the course of the program however, they saw drastic reductions in these behaviours and attributed this to the approaches used in conflict transformation.

A similar theme emerged around some participant's sense of ownership. Again, the approaches used by staff, and the communal culture of the program, helped to deter the need to "own" items or take them from others. By helping all participants to develop a sense of community and communal ownership of the space and resources, "ownership" of an item did not hold the same value.

In terms of benefits to the community, the Willows program addresses a gap in the children's mental health system. Children with this level of emotional and behavioural issues are generally not accepted into mainstream summer outdoor recreation programs. Moreover, there are arguably no comparable alternatives within the local children's mental health system

While the program addresses a gap in the children's mental health system, it does not meet a need. Under the Willows has the capacity to accept a maximum of 25 children each season. Unfortunately there are hundreds if not thousands of children facing similar life circumstances, who will not benefit from the Willows experience.

### 8.1 Conclusions

Flowing from the discussion, the following conclusions were generated through a synthesis of findings that emerged through the research process:

1. Under the Willows achieved it's goals of seeing participants through to the completion of the program and to do no harm.

2. Under the Willows has facilitated some of the same positive outcomes that have been observed through similar programs including the Spiral Garden and Cosmic Birdfeeder in Toronto and the Butterfly Garden in Sri Lanka. Specifically:

- The program increased communication and positive interactions with family and friends. Participants became more polite and better listeners.

- The program helped to improve the general disposition of participants. Specifically, the children were seen to be happier and more outgoing.

- Some of the participants developed the ability to look at things differently, and consider others points of view.

- Some of the participants developed an interest and attraction toward gardening and nature.

3. The program had the effect of reducing a number of antisocial behaviours. Specifically:

    - There was a reduction in the negative behaviours of bullying and possessiveness among participants over the course of the program

4. The program addresses a gap in the local child mental health system. Children with this level of behavioural issues are generally not accepted into mainstream summer outdoor recreation programs, and no comparable alternatives exists within the local child mental health system.

5. While the program addresses a gap it does not meet a need. With the capacity to accept a maximum of 25 children each season, hundreds if not thousands of children facing similar life circumstances will not benefit from the Willows experience.

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